Ugly/Ground Plane Construction

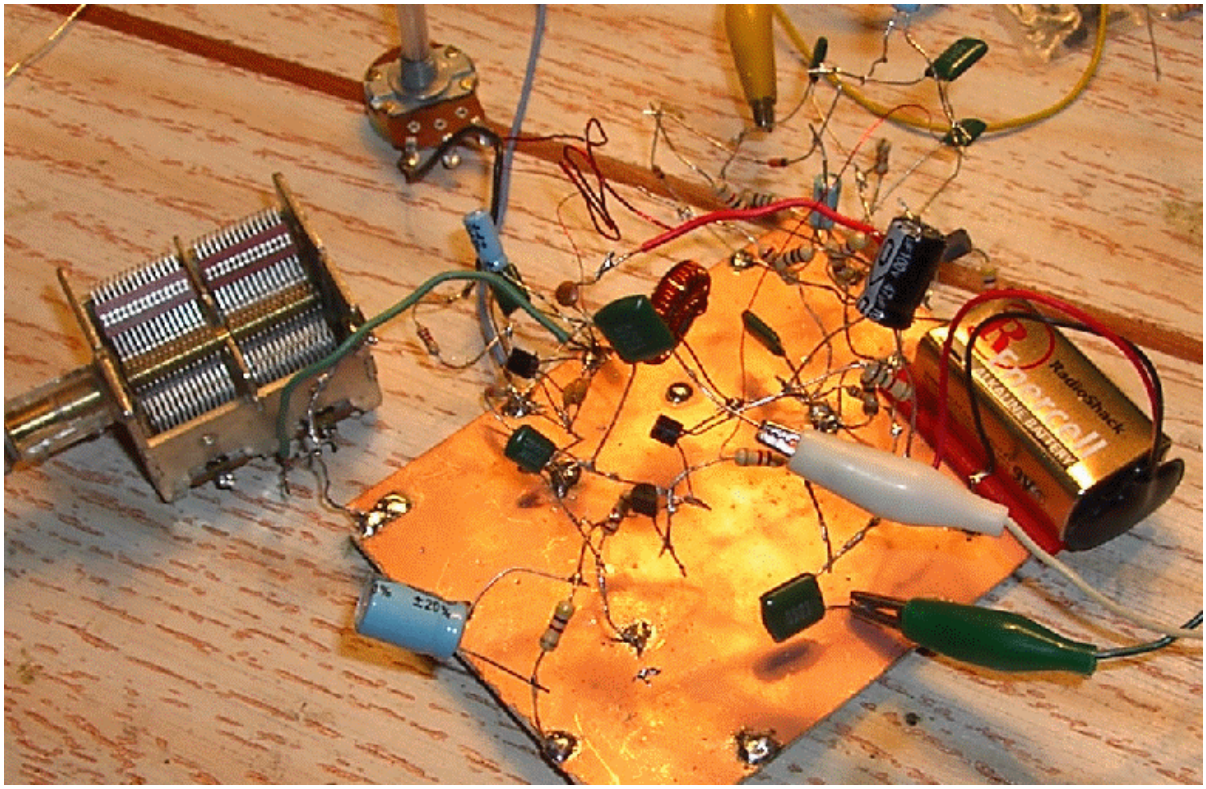
The Method I Use in Building My Simple Receivers

Oct. 7, 2006 by Rick Andersen, KE3IJ

Occasionally I get emails from readers who want to know how I build these simple radio receiver circuits on an "L-shaped chassis" without cutting and scoring the copper, what I mean by "L-shaped chassis," or "what's all this about 10 megohm resistors?", etc. I tend to forget that not everybody has done this before, and I usually take it for granted that the reader is an accomplished "basement-tinkerer" and should therefore be able to just look at a schematic diagram and then come up with his own layout and method of construction. Sorry if I have annoyed anyone -- that wasn't my intention.

When I first design a circuit, I make what a friend of mine used to refer to as a "spider" (or, "spider-web")-- basically just construct the circuit by soldering the components together, lead by lead, into a reasonable facsimile of the schematic (no chassis or pc board necessary-- the stiffness of the soldered leads themselves hold the "spider" circuit together). This method is quick, and allows me to modify things fairly easily. It also grows rather quickly into a "haywire monstrosity" if I allow it.

Sometimes I do use a piece of copper-clad pc board as a ground plane, even during the "spider" stage, as the photo below illustrates:



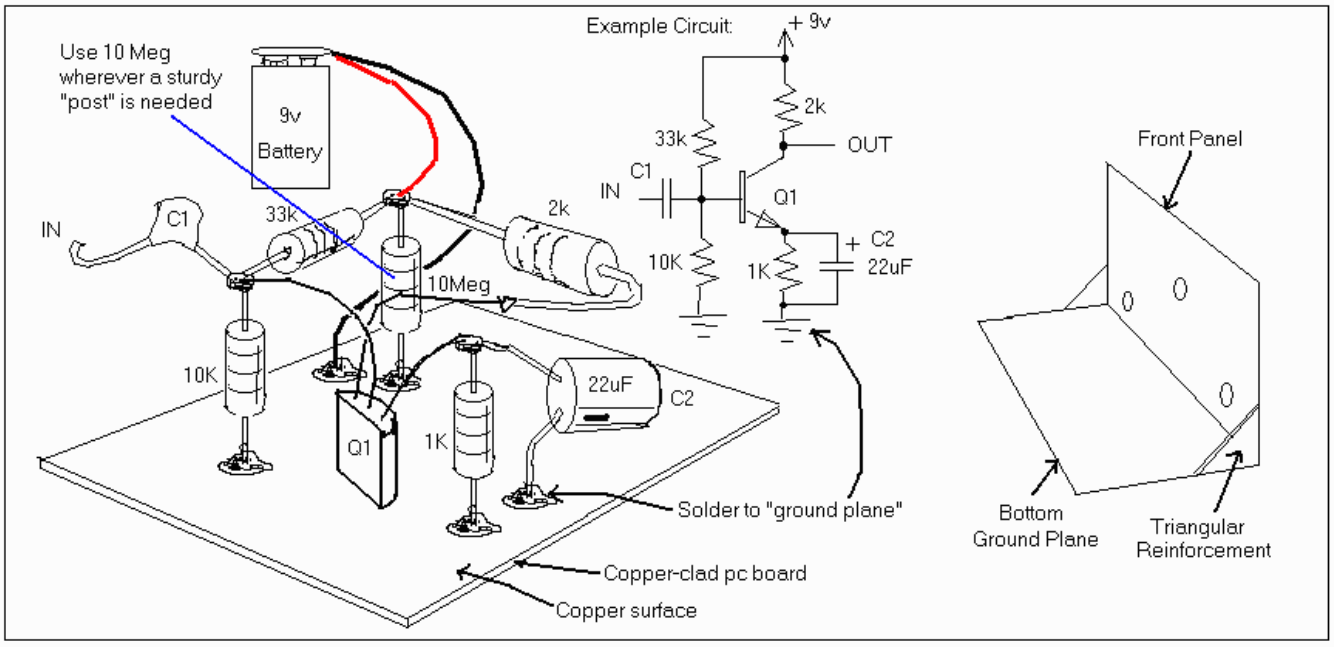
A "haywire" mess of my "AGC-80" Regen receiver in its early, experimental stage

To make things a bit clearer to you who have never built projects in this way before, I have attempted a free-hand diagram using Microsoft "Paint", which I converted to a .gif file and which you see below.

In the top-center of the diagram is the schematic for a simple common-emitter audio amplifier stage. The left side of the diagram illustrates how one might translate that schematic into an actual circuit on the copper-clad pc board. At right is a diagram of the "L-shaped Chassis." This is the style in which I build most of my circuits.

Basically, I use 2 pieces of 5x7 inch copper-clad pc board, available in the USA at **Radio Shack** [free plug]. One piece lies flat (the bottom piece), which is what I have shown in the diagram. I build my circuit on this bottom piece, using the copper floor as my ground connections ("ground plane"). Any resistors, caps, etc., that go to ground in the schematic, are literally soldered to this bottom ground plane and stood upright. At their top ends, the rest of the circuit is soldered, suspended up above the ground plane. Anywhere that I think I need some mechanical stability, I use a vertical 10 Megohm resistor, which acts to prop up and support the rest of the wiring above the ground plane. For most of the circuits I build, 10 Megohms is much higher a resistance value than any of the resistors in the circuit itself; therefore, the circuit pretty much ignores the 10M "posts", electrically, and they remain simply a mechanical "standoff insulator". The 2nd piece of copper clad board is drilled for switches, potentiometers, tuning caps, and earphone jacks, etc., and then is soldered at right

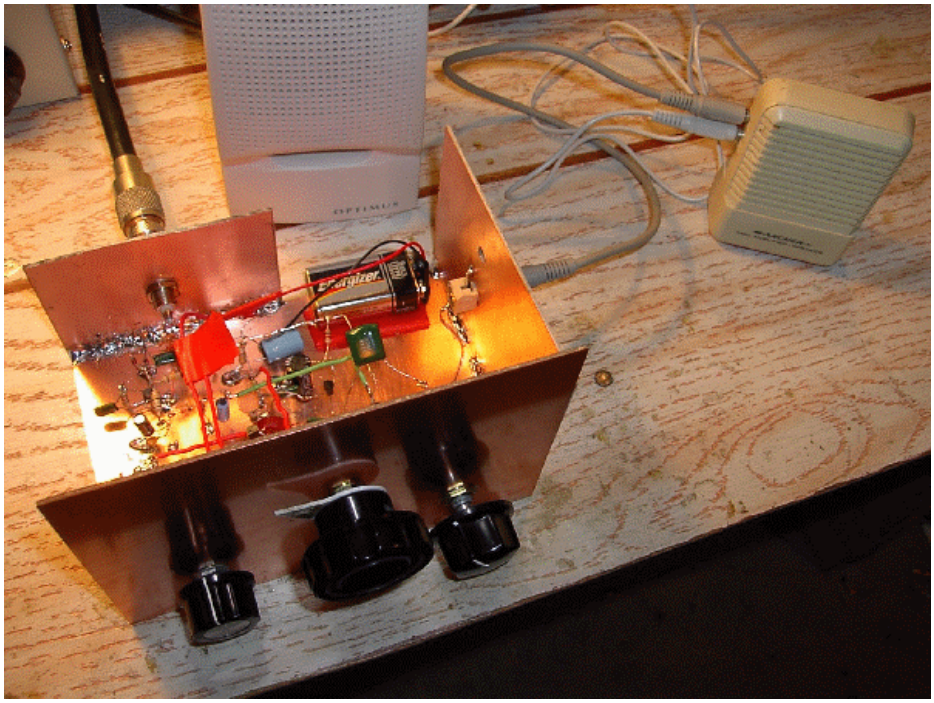
angles to the flat bottom piece, making an "L-shaped chassis". It also helps to solder triangular pieces of copper-clad board as mechanical braces, at the corners where the front panel is soldered to the bottom ground plane.



Below is a photo of my 2006 creation, the "AGC-80", a Regen receiver for the 80 Meter ham band with audio-derived AGC. There's an article on this receiver elsewhere on this website; meanwhile, notice that it is built in the same way outlined above-- an "L-shaped" chassis made of a bottom piece of copper-clad board, soldered to a vertical piece of the same kind of board which is the front panel. [I also added a back wall to hold the antenna jack, and a right wall to hold the audio output jack, as well as a triangular reinforcement piece of copper-clad, at bottom-left between the front panel and bottom piece, although you can't see it in this photo.]

To the right of the AGC-80 is the infamous Radio Shack/Archer little beige Amplified Speaker that I'm always mentioning. I may knock Radio Shack for other reasons [for example, that they have pretty much left us hobbyists behind, and have become just another consumer electronics store] but I will always say good things about their little $12.95 beige-colored Amplified Speaker. It works like a charm for the kind of projects I build. I also run an audio cable out of the Radio Shack amp to a bigger speaker, for better-quality sound-- in the photo you can see a white "Optimus" computer speaker pressed into this service. While the Radio Shack's speaker does a fine job, the Optimus sounds quite a bit louder and way nicer. Of course, you may argue that a *real* Electronics Geek rolls his *own* audio amp rather than rely on a commercially-made, external one. Well, I'm often too impatient to build the audio power amp myself, after having spent hours or days getting the RF part of the radio to work the way I want. Also, homemade audio amps tend to oscillate (squeal, motorboat, howl) in mysterious ways once lovingly installed on the same circuit board as the RF circuitry.... After a while one grows tired of trying 50 ways to make it happy, and would rather just hook up an Amplified Speaker and be done with it.

To each his own.



Please realize that you don't have to follow this method of construction (usually called "Ugly Construction" by hams), but I would advise you to make sure there is some equivalent of a copper ground plane in most of your radio projects... it helps to shield the circuit from outside influence (particularly when connected to earth ground) and contributes to stability.

I hope this has helped to give you a little better idea of the methods I use!
73 de Rick, KE3IJ

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